

# Pushing the Limits

## 1920–1930

When **Louise Rosine**, a tourist from Los Angeles, refused to roll her stockings up on a sweaty Chicago beach in 1921, a police officer moved in to arrest her. After all, proper bathing attire included a wool swimsuit and rolled-up stockings. Rosine informed the officer that it was nobody's business whether her stockings were rolled up or down. When he tried to apprehend the large woman, she punched him in the eye, broke his glasses, and bit him on the wrist. Once in jail, Rosine took off all her clothes and announced that she would remain naked until freed. The embarrassed warden pinned blankets around Rosine's bars so that no one could see her.

Before this time, women were expected to swim in layers of fabric, stockings, shoes, and sometimes even hats. Outfits that exposed more female flesh and showed off the contours of the body were viewed by many as an indication of a downward spiral to moral decay. As more women

went to beaches to swim, and bathing suits got smaller, city governments passed ordinances regulating what was appropriate.

In her own way, Rosine took part in a national debate about women's place in society. Should women



In some cases, beaches hired swimsuit patrols that ventured out with measuring tapes in hand to provide "first aid to the inadequately clad mermaid." Officers in one town were also encouraged to take action against "bald-headed men who came to the beach to stare." This policeman is ensuring that women follow the order that women's suits not be more than 6 inches above the knee at the Washington, DC, Bathing Beach.

be allowed to dress and act as they pleased? Women could now vote, but should they be allowed to shed traditional standards? Americans looked to the future with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Increasingly prosperous and interested in leisure, fewer women pursued progressive reforms. The great swimsuit debate of the twenties in many ways typifies the challenges of a nation attempting to deal with radical changes in the ways people lived.

## LIFE AFTER SUFFRAGE

Clearly this was a new time with different opportunities and challenges for women. After they gained the right to vote on August 26, 1920, people waited to see how life would change. Many suffragists predicted the dawning of a great new day when women would help bring an end to many of society's problems. The anti-suffragists anticipated a near-collapse of civilization. Who was right? How did the country react to this shift in politics?

Initially, there were some promising signs that women's votes would make a difference. In the first elections, politicians felt obliged to pay attention to female voters and the issues they might care about. As a result, in 1922 they passed the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, which provided the first federal money ever designated for health care. At the time, 250,000 U.S. infants died every year and poor families lost one in six children in the first year of life; this act intended to improve prenatal and infant health by funding maternity clinics.

However, victories for women were few. Politicians and suffragists alike soon discovered that

all forecasts of the outcome of women's suffrage were overblown. The truth was that women did not vote very differently from their husbands and fathers. As **Emily Blair** wrote in 1925, "*There is no woman block. . . . The women who have mated with men and borne men-children for countless ages have not decided to go off and wage political war against husbands and sons.*" In addition, there wasn't a particularly rousing female voter turnout. While some women were elected to high political offices (two women were actually elected as state governors in 1924), women remained primarily political outsiders. With a few exceptions, the voices of women in politics were heard less and less as the decade wore on. By 1929, even the Sheppard-Towner Act lost its funding.

So what happened to the many women who had toiled for women's suffrage? At the end of their long battle, many reformers were weary. For years they had picketed, campaigned, written letters, and delivered lectures. They had done so not only for the right to vote, but for child labor laws, better living and working conditions for the poor, and other noble causes. Women such as **Lucy Burns**, a dear friend of radical suffragist **Alice Paul**, had led suffrage marches and endured jail and hunger



### Did you know?

Native American women did not get the vote in 1920 because the U.S. government did not consider them citizens. Congress finally offered citizenship to all Native Americans in 1924.

In 1920, women of Yoncalla, Oregon, secretly plotted to oust all male city officeholders and elect women in their places. In what was called a **“feminist revolution,”** they rose “in their wrath, to take over city hall.” They kicked out inefficient officers to elect **Mrs. Mary Burt** as the new mayor, with **Mrs. Laswell**, the wife of the exiting mayor, as one of the newly elected officials. Apparently, Mr. Laswell was “much surprised.”

strikes. After winning the vote, Burns retired permanently from public reform. Another suffragist voiced the feelings of many: **“I no longer work in movements,”** she stated. **“My energies are bent on achieving income.”** These reformers and many others stepped out of the women’s movement and back into their clubs once the vote was achieved.

For those who remained, there was a tough road ahead. The campaign for suffrage had drawn women together with a single, achievable goal. Once that goal was attained, women found that they disagreed greatly on what should happen next, and they splintered into many smaller groups that had a difficult time attracting attention to their causes.

## EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT AND PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION

One of the biggest sources of conflict between women’s groups was a potential Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. The ERA, authored by suffragist Alice Paul, and first introduced in Congress in 1923, said, **“Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.”** With this amendment, Alice Paul and others sought to erase the more than 1,000 state laws that discriminated against women. In many states, a woman’s earnings still belonged to her husband and she had no legal rights over her children. Other state laws kept women from serving on juries. Supporters of an ERA felt that women and men should not be treated differently under the law.

On the surface it seems like an equal rights amendment would be something that suffragists



Many concerns about the morality of bathing suits were tossed aside when it was confirmed that pretty, scantily clad women could be real moneymakers. This “Bathing Girl Parade” was held on California’s Balboa Beach in June 1920, two months before women won the right to vote nationally. The annual Miss America Pageant was begun in Atlantic City in 1921 as a way to keep summer patrons around for a few extra days in September.



**Nina Allender's** political cartoon (published by the National Woman's Party in 1923) opposed protective legislation and showed its dangers. The sign on the door reads, "Protection—Motherhood is the noblest profession in the world. Therefore you must be given inferior jobs, the lowest pay, and your hours for work shall be limited. (Except in the HOME)."

would support, and yet, the vast majority of women's groups opposed it. Why? Arguments against the ERA revolved primarily around something called "protective legislation." These were laws that protected women because of their special status as mothers and potential mothers. Laws ranged from limiting the number of hours a woman could be

required to work to regulating the amount of heavy lifting expected of women workers. Other laws forbade hiring women to work at night. For years, many progressive women had lobbied for these laws to create better working conditions for poor women. Passage of an equal rights amendment would have negated the many laws that were enacted to protect women. Consequently, most progressive feminists who had fought for these laws were decidedly against the ERA. ERA advocates are working for passage to this very day.

Those who supported an equal rights amendment argued that protective legislation was bad for women. **Harriot Stanton Blatch** (daughter

Posters such as this one issued by the Milwaukee County League of Women Voters urged women to use their right to vote.



of Elizabeth Cady Stanton) and others believed the laws “crowded [working women] into lower grades of work.” Working women were split in their support for protective legislation. While it did save them from being exploited in some ways, it also made it impossible for women to be hired for many jobs they might have wanted. One female union member argued that those seeking protective legislation were *“trying to make our legislators believe that we women in industry are a class of weaklings, a special class of creatures devoid of both moral strength and physical stamina, totally unfit, mentally, morally and physically, to decide for our selves, to judge between right and wrong.”* Despite the efforts of ERA advocates, it failed to gain momentum and languished in Congress for many years.

Other groups had different plans to further the cause of women. One major group, the League of Women Voters, educated female voters and promoted laws that were beneficial to women and children. They reported on the number of women being elected to office, numbers that declined over the course of the decade. One of the major problems women’s groups faced was an aging membership without young people to take their places.

## YOUTH CULTURE

### “LET THE WORLD AND MORALS ALONE”

Few young women in the next generation were interested in progressive causes. In 1920, Cornell University’s student paper declared, *“The American public is weary of persons who seek to better the world . . . and sometimes wishes that among all the efforts at uplift and betterment some comfortable souls would get together and organize a society of down-pullers, to even things up a little.”* In 1927, it

stated, “let the world and morals alone.” Reform was out of vogue. To be concerned about the common good was passé, something associated with bitter old ladies—too boring, serious, stuffy, and old-fashioned.

The younger generation, unconcerned with how long and wearisome the journey had been, cared little for those who had worked for women’s rights. Writer **Dorothy Dunbar Brumley** pointed out that young women associated feminism with old “fighting feminists who wore flat heels and had very little feminine charm,” and those “who antagonize men with their constant clamor about maiden names, equal rights, woman’s place in the world, and many another cause.” Young women in the 1920s certainly were not going to give the best years of their lives to fight for causes. They were going to have a good time.

The old reformers didn’t sit back and take this criticism lightly. In 1923, **Charlotte Perkins Gilman** declared, “It is sickening to see so many of the newly freed abusing that freedom in a mere imitation of masculine weakness and vice.” After having labored so long, the indifference and frivolity of the next generation was hard to bear.

### “SHIMMYING TO THE MUSIC OF THE MASSES”: FLAPPERS

“The myth of the pure woman is almost at an end.”

—writer, V. F. Calverton, 1927

Who was this new generation? In 1920 two-thirds of the population was thirty-five or younger and the median age was twenty-five. Youth became a force in American culture like never before. This was the first generation to have wide access to movies, radio, cars, and telephones, all of which helped to

*“My generation didn’t think much about the place or problem of women. We were not conscious that the designs we saw around us had so recently been formed that we were still part of the formation.”*

—playwright **Lillian Hellman**

*Did you know?*

The term *flapper* was first used in Britain, where adolescent girls made a fashion statement by wearing their rain boots, or galoshes, open and flapping.



change their perceptions of the world. Many were better educated than their parents had been. They were growing up in a different world, and they were ready to be independent, experiment, and push the envelope of respectability. Young women, previously the least powerful members of society, burst into public consciousness. V. F. Calverton, a writer and editor, alerted the nation: *“Cigarette in hand, shimmying to the music of the masses, the New Woman and the New Morality have made their theatrical debut upon the modern scene.”* People called these girls “flappers.”

Shocking their elders, young women defied traditional standards. They cut their long hair, shortened their skirts, lowered their necklines, and tossed out their corsets. Many took up dancing, smoking, driving cars, and going to movies. They wore cosmetics and went on dates. In every way that women of the previous generation had gone out of their way to prove they were morally superior to men, many of the new generation set out to confirm just the opposite. Young women showed the world that they could partake freely of the same vices that had been available to men. H. L. Mencken observed that the flapper “seldom blushes; it is impossible to shock her.”

Flappers were not the first women to participate in these activities. Young women from the working class had been pushing the boundaries for some time. In 1900, the middle class had looked down on working-class girls and declared their unchaperoned music, dances, and dates disgraceful. Imagine their alarm when their own daughters and sons took up those very vices. It was then that the nation took notice. The flapper and her male counterpart were now the center of attention.

Middle-class daughters and sons discovered jazz (which had originated in black communities) and joined a national dance craze. Parents looked on

It is thought that author F. Scott Fitzgerald based the character of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* on his wife **Zelda Fitzgerald**, the personification of flapperhood. She wrote that the flappers “flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure, she covered her face with paint and powder because she didn’t need it and she refused to be bored because she wasn’t boring.”

Flappers at a football game in Washington, DC, and Winnebago flappers: **Florence, Mary, and Ann** with their mom, **Rachel Whitedeer Littlejohn** in Wisconsin.



Middle-class white girls were not the only flappers. Flapperhood cut across racial and economic lines.

Writer **Eunice Hunton**

**Carter** described schoolgirls in Harlem:

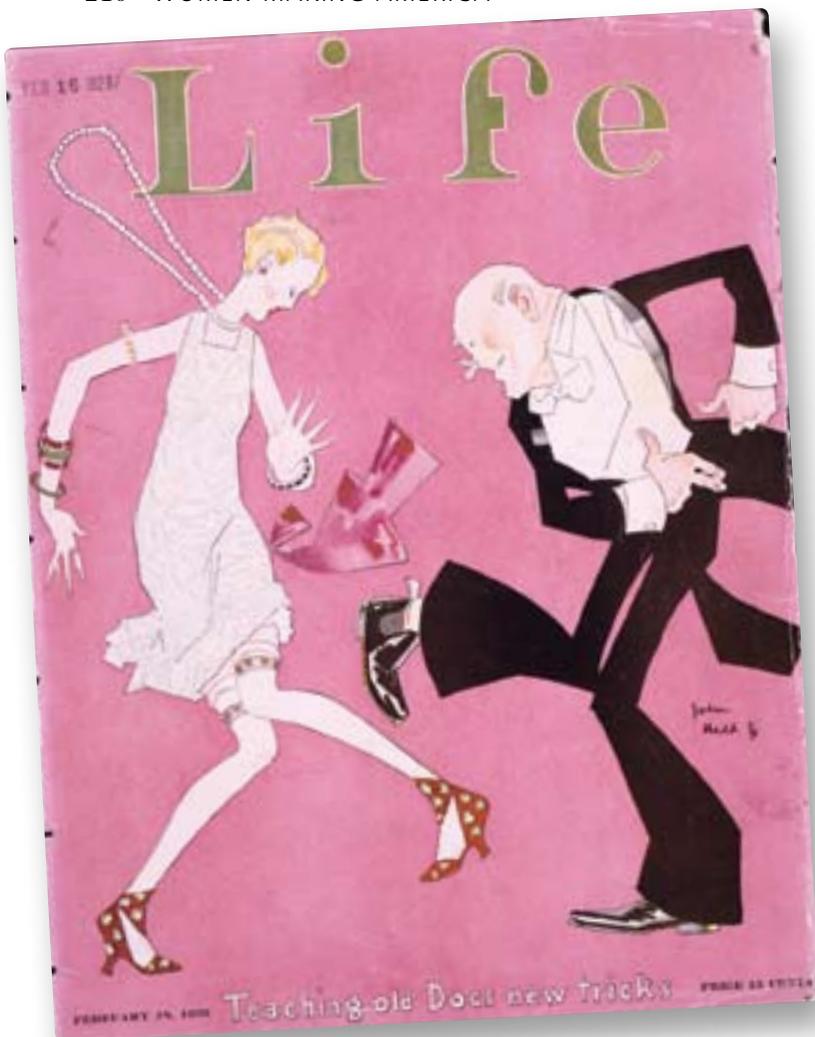
A group of school girls, bright felt hats perched jauntily on sleek bobbed heads, with short fur coats from which bright scarves fluttered in the night, passed by linked arm in arm, chattering as they went home from a late moving picture. To me, from my high perch, they looked like school girls the town over, but a passerby would have seen skins of olive, tan and copper beneath the bright felt hats.



in dismay as their children did the fox trot, tango, cakewalk, and kangaroo dip. Colleges, parents, city officials, and women's clubs all tried to put a stop to what they viewed as an immoral fad. One professor decried the evils of jazz, declaring that it "expresses hysteria, incites idleness, revelry, dissipation, destruction, discord and chaos." Middle-class parents were at a loss in dealing with their unmanageable youth. Certainly *they* had never danced like that.

As the new flapper fashions made a boyish figure the ideal, women became preoccupied with losing weight. Smoking was advertised as a way for

women to stay thin. One well-known ad encouraged women to "Reach for a Lucky instead of a Sweet." For women, smoking had always been associated with "bad girls." Suddenly, it became a symbol of equality. Women could enjoy the same bad habits as men. College administrators tried to halt the trend by expelling girls who smoked, but advertisers employed celebrities to convince women that smoking was socially acceptable. Lucky Strike hired fashion designers to promote dark-green clothing that was the same color as Lucky Strike packages so that a girl's cigarette pack could match her outfit.



This 1926 *Life* magazine cover captures a multitude of fads.

Younger girls imitated the attitudes and styles of women in magazines and movies. **Yvonne Blue** had the flapper requirements figured out by the age of fourteen. She confided her dieting woes in her diary as she desperately tried to achieve a necessary thin, lanky figure. She also wanted to adopt the temperaments of the flapper. She wrote on October 11, 1926,

***“Here are ten little things I should like to have, even tho they may not all be good: Self possession, Superiority, Cynicism, Will power, Silentness, Differentness, Subtlety, Immense range of knowledge, Supreme indifference, Great independence.”***

## EDUCATION

### PEER PRESSURE IN THE “PARADISE OF THE YOUNG”

By 1920 more than 85 percent of Americans aged five to seventeen were enrolled in school. Adolescents were spending more time together doing sports, driving, going to school proms and bonfires, “parking,” and going to the movies and the soda shop. The percentage of students attending college doubled from 8 to almost 16 percent between 1920 and 1930. Princeton’s dean, Christian Gauss, observed that students had forgotten college’s original purpose: “[College] has unfortunately become a kind of glorified playground. It has become a paradise of the young.” This was the first American generation to be more influenced by their peers than by the adults around them.

Thus, while young people were undertaking what seemed to be a daring rebellion against tradition, they did so in a massive group, experiencing enormous pressure to fit in with their peers. With movies, magazines, advertisements,

and advice books to lead the way, there never had been a generation so unified in its likes and dislikes. Conformity was mandatory for popularity. Numerous fads helped youth determine who was in and who was out. It was vital to wear the right clothes and be able to do the new dances. To fit in, young people swore and used slang terms like “queer birds” and “wet smacks” to describe those who were eccentric or unpopular. It was unfashionable to appear too responsible or serious-minded. Rather, the objective was to appear dashing, cynical, witty, and unconcerned.

As growing numbers of young women flocked to coeducational state colleges, the focus of college life was increasingly on social activity. Whereas women’s colleges of the previous generation had turned out an abundance of unmarried reformers, coed colleges primarily produced wives. The new college girl was more interested in joining a

sorority, getting a date, and finding a husband than in spending time in the company of other women working to reform society. Consequently, she often saw other girls as competition. She was going to make it in life, not with, but despite the other girls around her. She was determined to be a **“good dresser, a good sport, a good pal,”** so guys would ask her out.

## BEAUTY

### “A GOOD DRESSER”

Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion about the new fashions. In 1922, an Atlanta newspaper quoted a churchman as saying, **“Young men like to have the girls remove their corsets. . . . This makes dancing a thing of passion. Corsetless dancing is nothing but passion.”** When one Mexican American girl asked her mother to buy her a bathing suit, her mother replied, “No, you can bathe at home. I will educate you . . . but [I will] not buy a bathing suit. You can wait till I’m dead and buy it then.” A Japanese American man wrote to his hometown newspaper to complain about “these slick, knock-em-dead sheiks and these painted, red-hot shebas that strut about the streets of Little Tokyo.” He described the young women as “short-skirted baby dolls with their artificial rosebud lips and their languishing, mascara’ed eyelashes” who “arrogantly displayed” their “knock-kneed bowshaped, overgrown limbs.”

According to critics, the problem was not just what women wore, but the accompanying attitude.

Some protested that the new styles would be too distracting to men in the workplace. According to one male writer, working men “cannot stand having about them women who are obviously women and not imitation men.”

Many women, however, did not give long underwear, huge hats, and ankle-length skirts a backward glance. Forty-year-old **Mrs. H. Fletcher**

**Brown** quickly adopted the new styles. She wrote, “Skirts can’t be too short for me, now that at this age I am climbing in and out of automobiles, and gardening in the mud, and playing golf in all weather.” Of corsets, she simply stated, **“with bones digging in and garters pulling at every move. No wonder the modern athletic girl wants them off.”**

**Nina Wilcox Putnam** summed it up in a magazine editorial: “In the dress of the over-criticized flapper I see much that is good. Not only has she had courage to do what I merely dreamed but she got away with it in spite of clacking tongues.”

So what were the changes that drew so much comment?

**Bobbed hair:** Once a source of pride, long locks were clipped into a jaw-length hairdo. Bobbed hair may have been lighter, but it was not necessarily easier. Beauty parlors appeared across the United States even as women were fired from their jobs for cutting their hair.



Women, including Miss America, spent hours waving or curling their hair. They were aided by a permanent wave machine patented in 1928 by African American **Margorite Joyner**.

## Have you ever heard of . . . Ida Rosenthal?

Did you know that brassieres are a relatively new item on the clothing scene? Rosenthal, a Russian immigrant, and **Enid Bisset** owned a clothing store in New York. Rosenthal designed a bra meant to improve her customers' appearance and gave one to each woman who bought a dress. Bras were so popular that the Rosenthals founded Maidenform, a company that still exists. Of her life's work, Rosenthal said, "**Nature has made women with a bosom, so nature thought it was important. Who am I to argue with nature?**" By the end of the decade her company had sold more than one million bras.

**Makeup:** Cosmetics were no longer only for "racy" women. The "Egyptian look" became popular, with eyeliner smudged around the eyes. This, of course, meant that women needed stylish bags in which to carry their makeup. Brand new nail polishes were popular but impractical—the polish ran when wet.

**Knee-length dresses:** Dresses were straight and low-waisted. Silk was the fabric of choice because so many French cotton and wool mills had been destroyed during World War I. Some dresses were sleeveless—another indication to critics that America was in moral decline.

**Accessories:** Simpler dresses were spiced up with accessories. Women wore deep crown hats,

dangling earrings, costume jewelry, and head scarves. The Japanese discovery of the cultured pearl process made pearl necklaces more affordable.

**Stockings:** A stocking ad in 1927 proclaimed, "**A focal point of the world's attention is now the revealed knee.**" Stocking sales increased more than 100 percent during the decade. When skirts were long, baggy stockings were acceptable, but now that women were exposing their legs, they preferred formfitting silk stockings with a seam. Garters attached to a girdle held them up.

**Underwear:** Shocking but true, females needed less underwear with their new attire. A woman's choice to keep the corset and a cotton union suit, or to try the new peach-colored silk teddies and chemises indicated to many where she stood on the new styles.

## AMUSEMENTS

### "A GOOD SPORT"

Women grew increasingly interested in sports during the 1920s. They competed in track and field events and set new records. Many women and girls swam and played tennis and golf, though participation was limited to those who could afford memberships at clubs. But unless one was a star, attitudes toward women in sports continued to be condescending. Female athletes were often dismissed as less capable than men. One magazine article called the participants in a New England golf tournament "battalions of babbling women." Of the young women at the fore of sports stardom, Gertrude Ederle and Helen Wills attained heights that wowed Americans.

**Gertrude Ederle** swam the English Channel in 1926. The daughter of German immigrants, Ederle was twenty and already held numerous world records when she stepped into the cold waters of the channel. She sported goggles, a swim cap, and one of the first two-piece swimsuits ever worn in public. Slathered from head to toe in lanolin, she battled rain, high waves, shifting tides, and seasickness as

## "A GOOD PAL": DATING

Have you ever heard adults get sentimental about the good old days, when times were simpler and people somehow got along better? Would it surprise you to know that parents in the 1920s idealized the past in similar ways? During this time, young women and men began slipping out from underneath their parents' watchful eyes to go on dates. It was a revolutionary change in the way that girls and boys got to know one another better. Parents spoke fondly of their youthful years, when young men came to call on young women. Back then, courting took place in the home, in the presence of hovering parents and other chaperones.

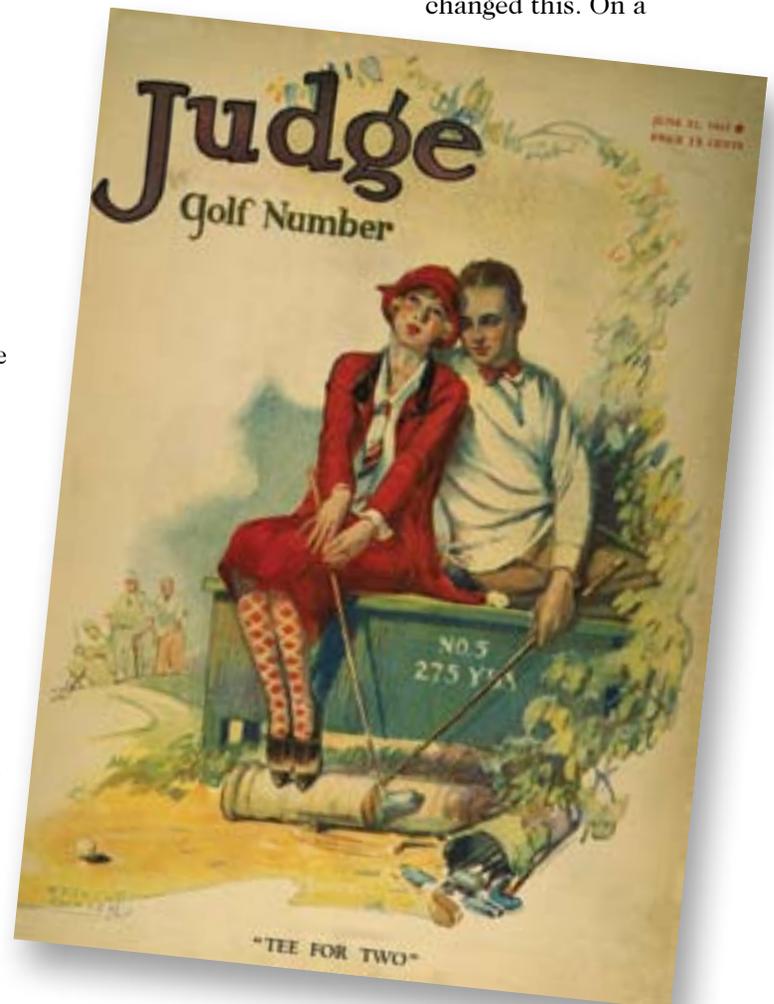
The old system of courtship had actually given girls and their families a measure of control over the courting process. A young man would never call without first being invited; the young woman would play hostess with the help of her family. There was an underlying code of manners that dictated the roles and behaviors of everyone involved. Dating changed this. On a



**Lillian Cannon** offers her best wishes to Gertrude Ederle as Ederle sets out to swim the English Channel.

she swam. She sang songs to keep herself going: “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and “Yes, We Have No Bananas.” Ederle swam from 7:09 AM until 9:40 PM, becoming the first woman to cross the channel and beating by two hours the times of the five men who preceded her. One reporter called it “the greatest athletic feat by a woman in the history of the world.” Crowds in Europe celebrated, and Ederle returned to one of the biggest ticker-tape parades ever held in New York. President Calvin Coolidge dubbed her “America’s best girl.”

**Helen Wills** was a powerful tennis player. Magazines and newspapers frequently wrote about her successes. Children taped pictures of her to their walls, Herbert Hoover recruited her to work on his presidential campaign, and Charlie Chaplin said that Wills playing tennis was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Competing against both men and women, she won tennis titles in the United States, France, and England, never lost a singles set between 1927 and 1933, and earned nearly three times as much as Babe Ruth.



In this 1920 journal entry, eighteen-year-old **Marion Taylor** wrote about a “blind date”:

JUNE 24—*Well, Mr. Trevor called. I must admit I was disappointed. He is short, and has a little bullet head and stiff yellow hair closely cropped, and a red face. . . . He sprang at me to help me on with my cloak, and I didn't want it on in the least and got so flustered. And he edged around for the outside of the sidewalk, and I forgot that the gentleman is supposed to do that and I nearly knocked him off because I started to walk on the outside too. At last he fell all over himself and I knew my family was enjoying the spectacle immensely from the window! . . . I was embarrassed half to death when we reached the house. . . . I made various lame remarks and there were several harrowing pauses. He asked for my phone number and said he would call me up some evening. I breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone. I hope to goodness he doesn't call.*

date, it was up to the young man to decide whom to ask out, where to go, and how much money to spend. A date was an invitation into the man's public sphere, where he acted as host and assumed control.

Cars played an important role in the emerging dating scene. The family battle for car keys is not a new one. Youth quickly learned that cars could whisk them far from the front porches and parlors of their parents. Adults worried about this new freedom. There was no good way to monitor kids' activities once they were out of sight. Dances could be chaperoned; cars could not. One judge voiced the concerns of many when he declared the automobile to be “a house of prostitution on wheels.”

Youth all across the United States sought this new freedom; however, some parents fought harder than others to keep a watchful eye on their children, especially their daughters. This was particularly true in Mexican American communities. **Maria Ybarra** remembered, “When we would go to town, I would want to say something to a guy. I couldn't because my mother was always there. She would always stick to us girls like glue. . . . She never let us out of her sight.” In a culture where a girl's purity was crucial to her family's honor, chaperones were a reality that Mexican American youth simply had to accept.

Young women and men were not left on their own to discover the new rules of dating. They could look to movies for clues (the first feature-length “talkie” appeared in 1927). **Kate Simon** remembered that “the brightest, most informative school was the movies. . . . *We learned how tennis was played and golf, what a swimming pool was and what to wear if you ever got to drive a car . . . and of course we learned about Love, a very foreign country like maybe China or Connecticut.*” One girl said that she learned to close her eyes while kissing. She admitted, “I always thought it rather silly until these pictures, where there is always so much love and everything turns out all right in the end.” Movies shown across the country taught people the same lessons about life and romance whether they lived in urban New York City or rural Kansas. One lesson was loud and clear: women were in open competition with each other for men's attentions. Ultimate success lay in capturing the best and richest man to marry.

## Have you ever heard of . . . Dorothy Dix?

In 1920, millions read her newspaper advice column. People wrote to her with questions about the most intimate details of their lives. Girls appealed for help in getting dates and catching husbands. In her column, Dix promoted chastity, but also suggested flirting with “the come-hither look in the eye, a sort of come-on look if you get what I mean.” Just before her death at the age of 90, she wrote, “My job has made me mother confessor to millions. I have given all that is in me trying to help them.”

## AT HOME

### “FRIENDS AND LOVERS”: MARRIAGE

The ultimate goal of dating, as it had been with courting, remained marriage. The rebellion of 1920s youth was often short-lived and not quite as wild as observers believed. In actuality, young college women married in ever-greater numbers and at earlier ages. Once she had lived it up a bit, the young flapper, and those aiming to be like her, married and worried more about buying kitchen appliances than about learning the steps to the new fad dance.

What had changed dramatically were people’s expectations of marriage and family life. Many believed that romantic love was “the only basis”

for a happy modern marriage. Women hoped to share “joys and sorrows with a mate” who would be “not merely a protector and provider but an all round companion.” The new modern families were supposed to provide a place where everyone could find affection, contentment, and personal fulfillment. Wives and husbands were to be “friends and lovers” with each other and “pals” to their children. For the first time, marriage counseling programs came into being.

Beyond maintaining this nurturing environment, new pressure was placed on women to “keep the thrill in marriage.” As movie star **Dorothy Phillips** reminded, *“marriage is a competitive game in which getting a husband is merely the first trick.”* Women’s calling to be “special custodians of romance” was a complicated one. They were supposed to continue to be exciting to their husbands while at the same time acting as domestic goddesses and doting mothers. It was up to the wife to figure out how to be both efficient and alluring. The result of their failure to do so was illustrated in more than three hundred movies that told the stories of cheating spouses.

Advertisers, a new power in society, capitalized on this concern by offering women items guaranteed to keep them young and desirable. As one woman advised,

*“a woman who is properly gowned can rule nations, while a misplaced hairpin has caused more tragic mistakes than a misplaced commandment.”*

Advertisements reassured women that they might save their marriages by purchasing the right products.

**D**id you know that Baby Ruth candy bars, which went on the market in 1921, were named after President Grover Cleveland’s daughter Ruth, who died at the age of thirteen?



A postcard of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in front of their home.

**MARRIAGE AND THE MOVIES** Movies, now a multimillion dollar industry, also shaped attitudes toward marriage. During the 1920s, one-third to one-half of Hollywood's screenwriters were women, many of whom were college educated and saw themselves as morally emancipated. It is interesting then, that although women in films were frequently portrayed as free-spirited and seeking equality with

men, the ultimate message for women was that they could have their wild moment, but in the end would return to their traditional roles.

The public was also very interested in movie-star marriages. When "America's Sweetheart" **Mary Pickford** tied the knot with handsome star Douglas Fairbanks, people felt they were observing the "most successful and famous marriage the world has ever known." The couple seemed to personify the joys of a modern marriage. She was youthful and sweet; he was manly and athletic. In 1920, Pickford told newspapers, "Married life is an art. It is something that must be carefully attended to." Like many film stars to follow, they basked in the luxury of their elite lifestyle and praised the home as the place where they found true happiness. They appeared to have the perfect formula for the happy, modern marriage: youth, beauty, romance, and a charming home filled with elegant things.

Their marriage didn't last, however. By the end of the 1920s, one in six marriages ended in divorce. Some blamed the "restlessness" of the new woman, who increasingly worked outside the home; others

*The Lifebuoy is good and you'll use Lifebuoy for life*

**Above all HE MUST HAVE HEALTH**

Is your precious baby destined for big things? Will he know the thrill of achievement—money—power? Or will he avoidably the byways of faith, effort and discarded hopes? To live well he must be well. The answer that you can give him is health. In the quietest of life lies the cradle of splendid health that always wins through to the hours and moments. The destroyer of health is sickness. Sickness is caused by the germs that lurk in all dirty things. The habit of constantly purifying hands, feet and body is man's surest protection against them. Lifebuoy prevents germs from the skin. Its powder. An absolute purity and gentle soap-like action make it particularly beneficial to the skin—keeping it soft, unchafed, with the underglow which is the secret of a radiant complexion—and safe.

*The Health Doctor*

The public health crusades of earlier decades resulted in a heightened interest in personal hygiene. People were encouraged to bathe more and use soap, toothpaste, shampoo, and mouthwash. How important does the ad make it seem that this woman buy the right kind of soap for her family?

pointed to the slackening of the nation's morals and rising premarital sex rates. One thing seems clear: with so much at stake, and expectations for marriage so high, many couples were disappointed with the realities of married life. Romantic dating relationships didn't always lead to romantic, ideal, modern marriages. Once marital happiness was declared essential, it became difficult to make people stay in unhappy relationships.

**ADVERTISING AND CONSUMERISM** For many, the 1920s were a time of plenty. Advertisers began using psychology to sell products. According to them, a woman's most important job was to buy, buy, and buy some more. Few families still employed maids, so magazines, ads, and advice books reassured the housewife that the most important way for her to show love for her family was to buy the right products, clean her own house, and prepare tasty, nutritious meals. Ads celebrated modernity and ease: "Where women once climbed cellar stairs, we now have only to open the pantry or refrigerator. . . . How much we have learned that they did not know, not only about saving labor, but about better food for our families!"

Shopping was easier. Many stores offered credit. Others made it possible to purchase food in one place instead of going to specialized shops. These new stores were called "supermarkets." Customers loved the newest sales gimmick that allowed them to put their merchandise in a basket and pay in the front of the store instead of filling out an order with a supply clerk. The store even delivered the groceries.

Problems such as body odor, which had long been considered inappropriate to talk about, found their way into ads: "Shall we discuss it frankly? Many a woman who says, 'No, I am never annoyed by perspiration.' . . . does not realize how much sweeter and daintier she would be if she were entirely free from it." This new openness offended some women and caused them to cancel their magazine subscriptions. Most simply tried the new products.

Women who could afford them bought newly available appliances such as electric irons and vacuum cleaners. Other new household gadgets

## Have you ever heard of . . . Lupé Velez?

Americans called her "The Wild Cat of Mexico." A redheaded actress from Mexico, she made a name for herself in Hollywood

playing beautiful, intense characters. Her personal life, including her speeding tickets and her off-screen romance with actor Gary Cooper, was reported in the newspapers.



Velez and other Hispanic actresses such as the regal **Delores del Rio** had a difficult time making the transition to talking films because moviemakers were convinced that audiences did not want to hear Spanish accents. To see Velez in action, look for the 1927 film *The Gaucho*.

included electric waffle irons, heating pads, toasters, food mixers and grinders, coffee makers, and curling irons. Although only prosperous families had indoor bathrooms, everyone wanted one. Refrigerators were expensive and unreliable, so many people continued to use an icebox. Each week the iceman delivered

Have you ever heard of . . .  
Louise Boyd?



Boyd, a wealthy California debutante, arctic explorer, and geographer once said, “I powder my nose before going on deck, no matter how rough

the sea is. There is no reason why a woman can’t rough it and still remain feminine.” She visited the Arctic for the first time in 1924 and loved it so much that she returned numerous times. Boyd began by hunting polar bears, but went on to gather scientific data on plants, animals, and sea depths. She did all this while traveling with a maid and wearing a flower. Her photographs and charts were considered so valuable that the United States classified them during World War II.

a large block of ice intended to last the week. While washing machines reduced some labor, the less expensive ones still required a woman to carry the heated water and put the clothes through a wringer by hand.

Treated water, pasteurized milk, and a new understanding of the role of vitamins and minerals in good health led to better, more varied diets. Women were reminded that the family’s health was their responsibility. Numerous companies marketed their foods as health products. Even candy and ice cream were promoted as “wholesome, nutritious food.” Fortified breakfast cereals replaced country-style breakfasts for many Americans. With increased access to canned vegetables, fruits, pork and beans, noodles with tomato sauce, and soups, women spent less time preparing food. In case they felt guilty for cutting corners, they were reassured by ads that promised “on the word of the greatest scientific authorities, that food in cans is as safe as food can be.” Salads and casseroles were popular, and most urban women now bought bread instead of making it themselves.

Advertisers assured housekeepers that by purchasing their products they could have “hours of leisure and recreation.” Yet, in reality, as the tools for preparing meals and doing housework increased, so did social expectations. People expected a woman’s house to be cleaner than in the past. One study showed that in the 1920s, women spent between 48 and 61 hours a week on housework—roughly the same amount of time their mothers spent doing housework. The nature of the work had changed, but the number of hours spent performing the work was the same.

**FARMWOMEN** Some could not afford to participate in the nation’s raging buying spree. Although the “roaring twenties” was a time of prosperity and glamour, dance contests, and cigarette smoking flappers for some, a full 40 percent of U.S. families still lived at the poverty level.

For the first time in American history, people in rural communities were outnumbered slightly by city-dwellers. Those who farmed for a living struggled more than most through this supposedly prosperous decade. Families who had to make the

## PAID WORK

Middle-class married women were the new workers of the 1920s. Some, like their working-class sisters, worked out of necessity, but an increasing number worked because they wanted to; they enjoyed the sense of fulfillment and liked earning extra money for their families. Although working-class and black women had combined wage work and family responsibilities for some time, the idea that it might be possible to do both was a new one for the middle classes. Middle-class women worked primarily in jobs that involved service, and used the same skills needed by wives and mothers. These included office jobs, education, nursing, and social work and paid approximately half of what men earned at comparable jobs. By 1925, 90 percent of all clerks and typists were women.

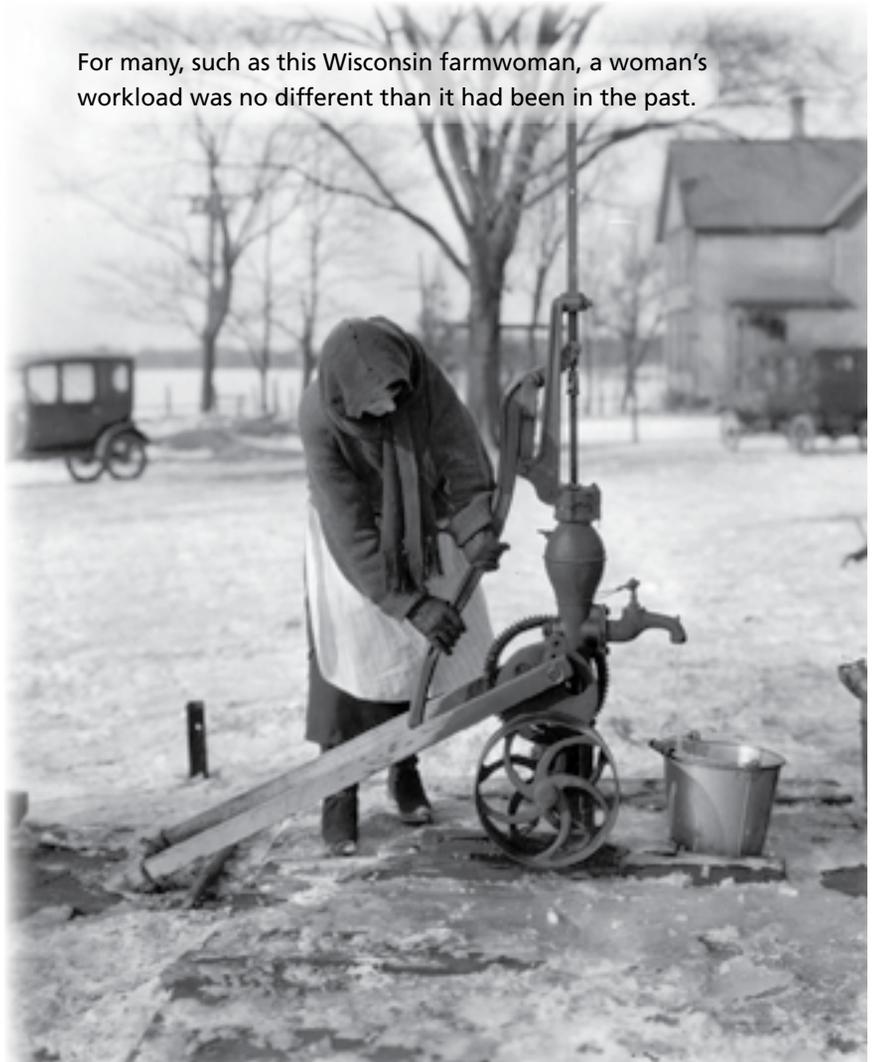
Working-class women who wished to pursue jobs in male-dominated fields faced steep

tough choice between buying a new tractor and farm equipment or having electricity or running water chose the farm tools.

**Annie Greenwood** was one of these rural women. She and her husband homesteaded in Idaho. She wrote of women on farms, “The reason mentally deranged farm women are not in the insane asylum is because they are still on the farms. I do not write this to make you smile. The sanest women I know live on farms. But the life, in the end, gets a good many of them—that terrible forced labor, too much to do, and to little time to do it in, and no rest and no money.”

While there were doubtless happy moments on farms, the underlying reality was that, in the 1920s, many farmwomen lived difficult lives. Unfortunately, conditions for rural communities would only get worse in the coming years.

For many, such as this Wisconsin farmwoman, a woman's workload was no different than it had been in the past.



*Did you know?*

New York created a Policewomen's Bureau in 1926. Policewomen were specifically assigned cases involving women, children, and shoplifting.

opposition. When World War I ended, many were pushed out of the “masculine” jobs they had filled while the men were away. Although women's foray into new occupations turned out to be mostly temporary, their sense of opportunity was not. The experience had changed them. Women wanted more options and better-paying jobs. They wanted to be able to earn a living and have time left over for other activities. **Anzia Yeziarska**, a working woman and immigrant, spoke for many when she wrote, “Women who have known the independence of earning their own livings before marriage are the ones who feel most poignantly the humiliations they have to live through while being supported.”

Half of women workers still earned their wages in factories, as servants, or in agricultural labor. Black, Hispanic, and Asian American women continued primarily to occupy the worst jobs among these. New protective legislation ensured that hours and conditions were better than in the past, but there was still much room for improvement.

## DECADE OF ISOLATION

Strangely enough, a decade that was wild and innovative for some was also profoundly conservative. Americans reacted to immigration, the great migration, World War I, and the rapid growth of industry and science by turning inward. During the 1920s, the government passed laws restricting

immigration and the right to teach evolution in the schools. Unions and women's groups were accused of being Communist. Race riots destroyed black communities, and foreign-born individuals were accused of un-American activity and deported. The tendency toward isolation is also evident in two well-known movements that rocked the country.

### “GIVE PROHIBITION ITS CHANCE”

“Ever since the days of Noah there has been a drink problem,” wrote **Ella Boole**, president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). By the time the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the production and sale of alcohol went into effect on January 16, 1920, crusaders had been lobbying for nearly a hundred years to outlaw drinking. Temperance arguments were valid ones: “It was the home that suffered. . . the women and children who did without necessary food and clothing because of money spent for drink . . . It was the wife and mother who listened until morning for the staggering footsteps of her drunken husband or son.” Boole suggested that America “give Prohibition its chance” by following the law “from home to home.”

But much of America did not go dry. The violence and illegal activity that followed prohibition are legendary. Women as well as men frequented hidden bars, or “speakeasies.” Manufacturers made

**Mrs. Graze Knippen**, of Zion City, Illinois, helps get rid of 80,000 pints of beer.



special alcohol flasks that could be strapped to a woman's leg under her dress. College youth drank on the sly. A fiery preacher named John Straton went undercover to a number of dance halls in 1925 and saw “tipsy girls” and “young women who were raving drunk, some of them surging out of the hall on to the street outside, with their loud talking.”

Women were instrumental in creating prohibition, and, interestingly, just as instrumental in repealing it. Out of the ranks of temperance crusaders came a group as conservative as the WCTU, the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR). Like the WCTU, the WONPR believed that homes should be protected, and that alcohol did great damage to society. But their conclusions about prohibition were different. They saw the results of the Eighteenth Amendment as being far more damaging to society than the original problems of alcohol consumption. They also decided that temptation would always exist and that self-control, in the case of alcohol, must be a personal effort. Temperance Union members felt betrayed by these women, whom they had believed were their allies. Nonetheless, the WONPR worked to end prohibition. In 1933, the Eighteenth Amendment became the first and only amendment ever to be repealed.

## SELF-APPOINTED GUARDIANS OF MORALITY: THE KU KLUX KLAN

Participation in suffrage politics, missionary work, and the temperance movement led hundreds of thousands of white Protestant women down an unexpected path in the 1920s. When the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was resurrected, these women used their acquired skills to further white supremacist goals.

Although the new Klan was the brainchild of William Simmons, it was **Elizabeth Tyler**, the woman he recruited to be his publicity manager, who effectively sold it to the public. She was so successful that the Klan became huge overnight, with as many as half a million female members by the middle of the decade. They had their own organization, Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), and did not want men to tell them how to run it. Their charitable deeds, church dinners, Klan

## Have you ever heard of . . . Celia Cooney?

Although she didn't look the part, Cooney was a bank robber. She and her husband Edward held up ten banks for a total of \$1,600 in the early 1920s. People called her the **“bobbed-hair bandit.”** When the Cooneys were captured in 1924, they were given ten to twenty years in prison but were paroled seven years later.



weddings and baby baptisms masked the underlying belief that Catholics, blacks, Jews, immigrants, and other minorities were a threat to the United States.

The WKKK picked up where the KKK left off and was just as effective. Determined to reform schools, influence local politics, and rid their communities of unwanted individuals, members circulated falsehoods, boycotted businesses, and spearheaded social exclusion campaigns. They also turned names of people they thought needed physical punishment over to the male Klan. These activities had especially disastrous results in towns

with small and very visible minority populations. WKKK members were unmoved by the damage they did to individual lives because they were convinced of the moral correctness of their actions. When interviewed years later, many WKKK members remembered the experience as a wonderful community affair. After a series of scandals in 1929, the Klan fell apart as quickly as it had begun. Its remnant struggled on, but without a large membership or widespread public support.

## ARTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

### THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

When half a million African Americans migrated north between 1914 and 1920 they hoped to escape the blatant racism of the South. Unfortunately, it followed them. Many settled in the upper Manhattan neighborhood of New York City called Harlem. Harlem became home to a wide range of poor, middle-class, and wealthy blacks, West Indians, and Hispanics. Treated nearly everywhere as second-class citizens, blacks found in Harlem a place where they could express themselves. Between the two world wars, this population's pent-up energy and desire spilled over in an unprecedented flood of creativity that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. As the movement spread to other cities and even to the Caribbean and Europe, Harlem became more than a place; it became a state of mind. During this time, African American writers, musicians, and artists challenged the indignities of white prejudice.

Writers published books and newspapers and gathered in salons such as the “Dark Tower,” owned by **Madam C. J. Walker**'s daughter **A'Lelia Walker**, to debate issues of race. Even this haven from outside prejudice had its own pecking order of color, class, and gender. To be uneducated, too dark-skinned, or too poor placed one at a disadvantage. Women, however talented, suffered the gender bias of their husbands and male colleagues.

Writer Langston Hughes recalled that after Zora Neale Hurston moved into an apartment with no furniture or money, “friends gave her everything, from decorative silver birds, perched atop the linen cabinet, down to a footstool. And on Saturday night, to christen the place, she had a hand-chicken dinner, since she had forgotten to say she needed forks.”

### WRITING IN HARLEM

**Zora Neale Hurston** was funny and smart—the life of the party. She told fabulous stories, published numerous books and essays, and was well-known by both blacks and whites in the literary community. A fellow writer said of Hurston, “She seemed to know almost everybody in New York . . . and had met dozens of celebrities whose friendship she retained.” Yet when writer **Alice Walker** put a tombstone on Hurston's grave in the 1970s, few people remembered that Hurston had ever existed.

Hurston, the daughter of a poor Florida minister, left home after her mother died and worked as a domestic and a servant in a traveling theater group. Through sheer ingenuity and will she managed to get a college degree and do graduate work. Her first short story was published when she was thirty. She then traveled around the South and Caribbean and published her observations in a book entitled *Mules and Men*.

Hurston's writing gave voice to a group to whom few people paid any attention—rural black women. She portrayed relationships within black communities and depicted women who were capable and determined. The work of her own she loved most was *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). She described it as the “untold story” inside her. Her



Zora Neale Hurston beating a drum.

Battling great odds, women such as **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, **Nella Larsen**, **Dorothy West**, and **Helene Johnson** wrote at a time when white publishers were rarely interested in their work, and their own community was sometimes patronizing.

While their works explored universal themes such as aging, marriage, parent/child relationships, community, and violence, these women frequently showed how such topics were complicated by race and class. They also provided windows into the double bind of being both female and black in a society that placed little value on either.

## SINGING THE BLUES

Other women found Harlem fame by singing the blues—a uniquely black American style of music

colorful characters and her use of black dialect were controversial among her colleagues, who feared that she reinforced negative racial stereotypes. Hurston insisted that race was not her central concern:

***“From what I had seen and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or woman do such and such, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli.”***

The rediscovery of Hurston led historians to wonder about other black women who wrote between 1900 and 1945. Researchers turned up more than one hundred writers of poetry, children’s books, short stories, novels, plays, and essays.



Bessie Smith.

that was born in the slave quarters of the American South. African American women performing on stage and cutting records in the 1920s first introduced the blues to a wider audience. **Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Alberta Hunter** were all born to poor parents in the South. Bessie Smith was raised by relatives after her mother died and Alberta Hunter by her mother after her father abandoned the family. Ethel Waters felt like she never really had a family at all.

Each woman had her own style and first made her name in the South. They also occasionally viewed one another as competitors. Waters remembered that “people everywhere loved [Smith’s] shouting with all their hearts,” but the crowds who nicknamed Waters “Stringbean,” also adored her “low, sweet” way of singing the blues. A friend of Hunter’s recalled that that when she sang about being jilted, “you felt so sorry for her you wanted to kill the guy she was singing about.”

Singing was an unreliable way to earn a living, so each woman in turn experimented with

film, stage, musical extravaganzas, and radio broadcasting. But white Americans had limits to what they would allow from a black woman. Waters eventually accepted roles playing caring black domestics in Hollywood films. Smith died in 1937 from the injuries she sustained in a car wreck (**Janis Joplin** would place a tombstone on her grave in 1970). Hunter returned to the stage as an elderly woman after having spent most of her adult life caring for her mother and working as a nurse. Their musical accomplishments, however, lived on to inspire and sustain a new generation of blues and jazz singing women.

## WOMEN IN FLIGHT

Flying above Harlem and above the debate on the female’s place in society was a new woman—the woman aviator. Before World War I there had only been seven licensed female pilots, but in the 1920s



**Grace Hurd, Evelyn Harrison, Corinna DiJulian, and Grace Wagner** (under the car) learn the art of auto mechanics at Central High School in Washington, DC (1927).

The attention given to women pilots was not always positive. A 1925 *Time* magazine article quipped:

Because of the impaired co-ordination of their nerves under pressure, the liability of their hearts to variation, and their general inclination to giddiness, women seldom function as airplane pilots. Occasionally, in flying circus outfits, women have capitalized the fact that their sex is, in the air, a freak, and accepted large sums of money to perform comparatively safe flights.

women aviators became increasingly visible. Some used their skills to dazzle people and earn money by traveling the country with flying “barnstorming” circuses. Crowds were amazed to see women flying upside-down or jumping out of airplanes. **Marie Meyer** performed flying stunts at state fairs. She also stood on the wings of the airplane her husband flew between buildings in St. Louis.

Other female pilots saw flying as a means of helping people. **Florence Barnes**, a movie stunt pilot, was one of a number of woman aviators to create a disaster assistance corps. To prove their

effectiveness, they dropped a crate of eggs from 7,000 feet without breaking one. **Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie**, the first woman to earn a professional air mechanic’s license, patrolled for forest fires with her husband.

Although trained as a hairdresser, **Bessie Coleman**’s dream was to open a flight school for blacks. This daughter of sharecroppers went to France for training because no U.S. flight school would admit a black woman. As the first African American pilot, she returned to the United States to perform in air shows. Her career was cut short in 1926 when she was killed while rehearsing for a show in Florida.

Because airplanes were still relatively new, women had many opportunities to experiment



**Mary Fechet** in flying gear.

and set records. **Amelia Earhart**, who had worked as a telephone operator, bought her own airplane and flew solo across the United States and back in 1928. The next year, women pilots began their own organization, the Ninety-Nines, with Earhart as president. Member **Katherine Sui Fun Cheung** told reporters, “I don’t see any reason why a Chinese woman can’t be as good a pilot as anyone else. We drive automobiles—why not fly planes?” The first women’s cross-country air derby from California to Ohio was also in 1929. Fifteen of the twenty “sweethearts of the air” finished the race.

For the sweethearts of the air, flappers, and others, America seemed full of opportunities in

the 1920s. Expectations of women’s capabilities appeared to be expanding. Women, as individuals, could aspire to work and play as never before. There seemed to be nothing that could stop the progress of a modern society. In 1920, **Edna St. Vincent Millay**, a young poet, actress, and playwright, penned this quatrain that for many has come to describe the era:

**My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—  
It gives a lovely light!**